

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

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The Crisis Presidency? The Swedes Take the EU Baton

Heather A. Conley

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Q1: What is on the agenda for the Swedish EU presidency?

A1: On July 1, the Swedish government takes the helm of the EU presidency during a challenging period for the European Union. As each member state of the European Union takes its turn as president of the European Council for a period of six months in accordance with a pre-established rotation, the agenda of each presidency reflects the interests of the member state. It is a critical position as each presidency plays a central role in organizing the work of the council and serves as the driving force in setting the agenda, as well as directing the legislative and political decisionmaking process.

The agenda of the Swedish presidency will focus primarily on managing the ongoing economic crisis, as well as seeking to formulate a coherent and robust European position on climate change prior to the December 2009 Copenhagen UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

Q2: How does the potential ratification of the Lisbon Treaty change the EU presidency?

A2: The Swedish presidency could signify the end of an era if the Lisbon Treaty, designed to streamline and clarify the roles of the various EU institutions, were to be ratified by all the member states by the end of the year. The Lisbon Treaty would eliminate the rotating presidency and create a formal president of the European Council. This individual would be elected by a qualified majority of the council for a term of two and half years and would represent the interests of the European Union in the foreign policy arena. However, if the Lisbon Treaty is not ratified by all member states by the end of the year, there would be significant confusion as to what processes the European Union would follow in 2010, causing significant disruption to the Swedish agenda.

Q3: What could potentially derail the Swedish agenda?

A3: There will be difficult debates ahead regarding the future expansion of the European Union, specifically on Turkey's prospective membership. Sweden would like to make progress with Turkey on its EU accession talks, which did not move forward in the first half of 2009 under the Czech EU presidency. France and Germany have revived calls to offer Turkey a "privileged partnership" rather than outright EU membership. Sweden must walk a fine line between seeking renewed momentum on Turkish accession talks and risking a political backlash that may subvert its other agenda priorities.

An EU presidency however, is ultimately judged by how it reacts to unforeseen crises. Much of the French presidency agenda in the last half of 2008 was defined by Russia's invasion of Georgia. In January of this year, the Czech presidency had to immediately address a midwinter shutoff of Russian energy supplies to Europe due to a dispute between Russia and Ukraine. It appears likely that the Swedish presidency might face similar challenges with yet another row brewing between Moscow and Kiev over gas supplies. The Swedish agenda may also be hijacked by a number of evolving issues—from the situation in Iran to North Korea (Sweden represents U.S. interests in Pyongyang) to the Middle East peace process to deteriorating security in Afghanistan and Pakistan to any number of other unforeseen international crises not currently on anyone's radar screen.

Heather A. Conley is senior fellow and director of the Europe Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.

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